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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to investigate the social-cognitive functioning of aggressive and victimized elementary school children. A total of 149 fourth- through seventh-graders responded to a peer nomination inventory designed to assess children's tendencies toward aggression and victimization. Self-report questionnaires were then administered to assess: (1) outcome expectancies for aggressive behavior; (2) outcome values for aggressive behavior; and (3) self-perceived efficacy for emotional regulation of fear, anger, and euphoria. The findings indicated that aggressive children expected aggression to result in control over their victims, did not expect retaliation from their victims, and did not care whether their victims retaliated or not. Victimized children were more likely to expect retaliation for aggression. Aggressive children reported more difficulty regulating angry emotional reactions than did nonaggressive children. (MDM)

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Social-Cognitive Correlates of Aggression and Victimization

by

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ABSTRACT

Aggressive children possess cognitive distortions and biases that contribute to their aggressive behavior (Bandura, 1986; Dodge, 1986; Perry, Perry, & Kennedy, 1992), but little is known about the cognitions of victimized children. The goal of this study was to investigate the social-cognitive functioning of aggressive and victimized elementary school children. Fourth- through seventh-grade male and female children responded to a peer nomination inventory designed to assess children's tendencies toward aggression and victimization. Self-report questionnaires were then administered to the children to assess:

1. Outcome expectancies for aggressive behavior
2. Outcome values for aggressive behavior
3. Self-perceived efficacy for emotional regulation for anger, fear, and euphoria.

Subjects were classified into four groups according to median splits along dimensions of aggression and victimization (see Figure 1). Their scores on the social-cognitive measures were examined in 2 X 2 X 2 ANOVAs in which aggression status, victimization status, and subject sex were three between-subjects factors. Findings indicated that aggressive children, compared to nonaggressive children, expected aggression to result in control over their victims, did not expect retaliation from their victims, and did not care whether their victims tried to retaliate or not. Victimized children, compared to nonvictimized children, were more likely to expect retaliation for aggressing. Aggressive children reported more

difficulty regulating angry emotional reactions than did nonaggressive children. Several sex differences on the social cognitive measures were also found.

HYPOTHESES

1. Outcome expectancies. Aggressive children will be more likely to anticipate positive outcomes and less likely to anticipate negative outcomes for aggression than will nonaggressive children. Victimized children will be less likely to anticipate positive outcomes and more likely to anticipate negative outcomes for aggression than will nonvictimized children (unless they are also aggressive, in which case they will respond like aggressive children).

2. Outcome values. Aggressive children will assign more value to the positive outcomes of aggression and less value to the negative outcomes of aggression than will nonaggressive children. Victimized children will assign less value to the positive outcomes of aggression and more value to the negative outcomes of aggression than will nonvictimized children (unless they are also aggressive, in which case they will respond like aggressive children).

3. Self-perceived efficacy for emotional regulation. Aggressive children will perceive themselves as having more difficulty regulating anger than will nonaggressive children. Victimized children will report more difficulty regulating fear than will nonvictimized children. Children who are both aggressive and victimized will report more difficulty regulating both fear and anger than will children who are neither aggressive nor victimized.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 149 male and female children (79 boys and 70 girls) in the fourth- through seventh grades of a university laboratory school serving a primarily white middle- and upper-middle class population.

Measures

Measures consisted of a peer nomination inventory (PNI) and three other self-report questionnaires designed to assess outcome expectancies for aggressive behavior, outcome values for aggressive behavior, and self-perceived efficacy for regulating three states of emotional arousal (anger, fear, and euphoria).

Peer Assessment of Aggression and Victimization. To assess children's tendencies toward aggression and victimization, subjects responded to the PNI which required them to check off names of same-sex children in their grade who fit each item. The PNI contained a total of 26 items, with 7 items keyed for aggression (e.g., "He/She tries to pick fights with other people"), 7 items keyed for victimization (e.g., "He/She gets called names by other kids"), and 12 filler items (e.g., "He/She likes to help the teacher). Subjects were classified into four groups according to median splits along dimensions of aggression and victimization, as presented in Figure 1.

Self-Report Questionnaires. Self-report questionnaires were administered to the children to assess:

1. Outcome expectancies for aggressive behavior. Expectancies for three kinds of outcomes were assessed: control over the victim, victim suffering, and retaliation from the victim.

2. Outcome values for aggressive behavior. The values that children assigned to each of the above three kinds of outcomes were assessed.
3. Self-perceived efficacy for emotional regulation for anger, fear, and euphoria.

Table 1 provides sample items from each of these self-report questionnaires. Responses to all the questionnaires were scored so that lower scores reflected lower outcome expectancies, values, and self-perceived efficacy for emotioanal regulation.

Procedure

The PNI was group-administered to children in their classrooms. Approximately a week after responding to the PNI, children responded to the self-report questionnaires. The questionnaires were administered on a classroom basis at two separate testing sessions to prevent test fatigue. Their scores on the social-cognitive measures were examined in 2 X 2 X 2 ANOVAs in which aggression status, victimization status, and subject sex were three between-subjects factors.

RESULTS

An analysis of variance on children's expectations for control over the victim revealed a significant effect for subject aggression status, $F(1,141) = 11.81$, $p < .001$. The analysis on children's expectations for retaliation from the victim showed significant effects for subject aggression status, $F(1,141) = 5.42$, $p < .05$, and subject victim status, $F(1,141) = 18.97$, $p < .001$. Table 2 provides the means and standard deviations for outcome expectancies measures. The analysis on children's values for retaliation revealed a

significant effect for aggression status, $F(1,141) = 8.28$, $p < .005$. Table 3 provides the means and standard deviations for outcome values measures. The analysis for the emotional regulation of anger showed a trend for aggressive children to report more problems controlling anger, $p < .07$, one-tailed t test. Table 4 provides means and standard deviations for emotional regulation measures.

Overall, differences in outcome expectancies, values, and regulation for anger existed between aggressive children and nonaggressive children: aggressive children, compared to nonaggressive children, expected aggression to result in control over their victims, did not expect retaliation from their victims, did not care whether their victims tried to retaliate or not, and reported more difficulty regulating anger. Victimized children, compared to nonvictimized children, were more likely to expect retaliation for aggressing. There was a trend for victimized boys to assign more value to (i.e., to be more disturbed by) the thought of causing a victim to suffer than nonvictimized boys, $p < .06$, one-tailed t test.

DISCUSSION

Results support the findings of previous social-cognitive work (Boldizar, Perry, & Perry, 1989; Perry, Perry, & Rasmussen, 1986), showing that aggressive children differ from nonaggressive children in both outcome expectancies and outcome values. Results were disappointing, however, in that they showed few effects for victimization status. Future research on social cognition among victimized children might focus on other aspects of social information processing (e.g., attention to threatening events or ability to generate assertive rather than submissive responses during

interpersonal conflicts). The few effects for the emotional regulation measures may reflect the fact that the questionnaire measured children's ability to soothe arousal rather than their thresholds for arousal.

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Figure 1

Four Groups of Children formed by Factorial Combination of Aggression Status and Victimization Status

	High Aggression	Low Aggression
High Victim	Ineffectual Aggressors or Aggressive Victims	Nonaggressive Victims or Passive Victims
Low Victim	Effectual Aggressors or Aggressive Nonvictims	Nondeviant or Controls

Table 1

Sample Questionnaire Items

1. Item measuring expectancy for outcome of retaliation from the victim:

Just before school one morning, another kid comes over to you and starts picking on you. You're thinking about getting even by tripping this kid as the kid is going to class. If you did this, though, the kid might try to hit or push you. Do you think the kid might try to hit or push you?

_____Very sure the kid would try to hit or push me.

_____Pretty sure the kid would try to hit or push me.

_____Pretty sure the kid would not try to hit or push me.

_____Very sure the kid would not try to hit or push me.

2. Item measuring value assigned to outcome of retaliation from the victim:

Just before school one morning, another kid comes over to you and starts picking on you. You're thinking about getting even by tripping the kid as the kid is going into class, but if you did this, the kid might try to hit or push you back. Some kids would be worried if the kid tried to hit or push them, but other kids would not be worried if the kid tried to hit or push them. Which is true for you?

Really true for me	Sort of true for me			Sort of true for me	Really true for me
☐	☐	Some kids would be worried if the kid tried to hit or push them	BUT	Other kids would not be worried if the kid tried to hit or push them.	☐	☐

3. Item measuring self-efficacy of emotional regulation for anger:

You are having lunch with some of your friends in the school cafeteria. Another kid comes up and starts calling you names. It makes you really hot and angry, but you decide that you should cool down. Some kids would not be able to cool down, but other kids would be able to cool down. Which is more like you?

Really true for me	Sort of true for me			Sort of true for me	Really true for me
☐	☐	Some kids would not be able to cool down	BUT	Other kids would be able to cool down.	☐	☐

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Outcome Expectancies Measures by Subject Sex, Subject Aggression Status, and Subject Victim Status

	Aggressive subjects		Nonaggressive subjects	
Subject sex	Victimized	Nonvictimized	Victimized	Nonvictimized
	Expectation for control over victim			
Boys				
M	21.8	26.2	21.1	21.4
SD	3.4	4.6	4.4	5.0
Girls				
M	21.1	21.5	19.8	18.9
SD	4.9	5.3	3.6	3.7
	Expectation for victim suffering			
Boys				
M	22.1	23.0	21.4	22.7
SD	4.6	5.6	4.7	5.0
Girls				
M	20.9	20.0	20.7	19.8
SD	4.5	3.8	3.6	5.0
	Expectation for retaliation			
Boys				
M	21.6	16.4	22.7	19.0
SD	3.5	4.7	2.9	5.2
Girls				
M	21.6	19.2	21.4	21.4
SD	4.3	4.6	4.1	3.3

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of Outcome Values Measures by Subject Sex, Subject Aggression Status, and Subject Victim Status

	Aggressive subjects		Nonaggressive subjects	
Subject sex	Victimized	Nonvictimized	Victimized	Nonvictimized
	Value of control over victim			
Boys				
M	22.2	22.8	22.3	22.4
SD	3.3	5.6	4.7	3.9
Girls				
M	20.4	16.8	19.0	19.0
SD	5.3	5.1	3.8	4.7
	Value of victim suffering			
Boys				
M	19.2	17.0	19.8	18.5
SD	4.4	4.5	5.9	5.8
Girls				
M	24.3	27.3	24.8	24.9
SD	5.3	4.8	3.6	4.1
	Value of retaliation			
Boys				
M	15.6	13.3	18.0	16.7
SD	2.7	4.4	5.2	6.7
Girls				
M	20.3	21.9	22.6	22.6
SD	5.4	6.5	4.7	4.6

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations of Emotional Regulation Measures by Subject Sex, Subject Aggression Status, and Subject Victim Status

	Aggressive subjects		Nonaggressive subjects	
Subject sex	Victimized	Nonvictimized	Victimized	Nonvictimized
	Emotion regulation for anger			
Boys				
M	22.3	21.8	23.1	23.1
SD	3.4	4.8	4.2	4.3
Girls				
M	23.0	24.6	24.2	25.1
SD	4.3	4.2	3.3	4.4
	Emotion regulation for fear			
Boys				
M	24.7	25.0	24.8	24.8
SD	4.0	4.4	3.1	5.9
Girls				
M	25.1	24.2	24.5	24.1
SD	3.8	3.7	3.9	4.1
	Emotion regulation for euphoria			
Boys				
M	23.0	23.6	24.5	23.1
SD	3.3	3.6	3.1	4.0
Girls				
M	23.2	23.3	23.6	24.4
SD	4.1	4.2	3.9	4.3